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Government Indian Office Disapproves of Indian Congress Sodalities Begin Decline: Part II Continued from December

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Part II continued from December

Government Indian Office disapproves of Indian Congress
Sodalities begin to decline

by Mark Thiel

Among the activities 224 persons, mostly adults, were confirmed. A new chapel was consecrated and deliberations on the site for the next one were held. The congress concluded with the great farewell hands shake. Everyone got in a circle and shook hands with each other.

Among requests that surfaced at the congress were growing and persistent demands for more priests, churches and schools for the reservation communities.

In 1892, after voting on the site for the next congress, one delegate posed a comment: “The women folks had not given their vote. They would feel slighted if they had not to say anything.”

To this question martyr intervened with the rebuke, “In the church it was held so from the beginning that the woman had to keep silent in public affairs. Man has been appointed by God as head, to order and arrange. The woman’s honor and privilege is to govern the house and to raise and educate men.”

The next several congresses continued to be substantial gatherings. Many proposed making four local gatherings and the bishop would visit each one every four years. The Indians said they wanted annual access to the bishop for baptism and confirmation as well as what they desired the mutual support found in the general Sioux gatherings.

By 1895 Marty was bishop of the St. Cloud Diocese in Minnesota. He had an agreement with his successor, Bishop Thomas G. O’Gorman, by which he retained the Sioux Apostolate. Marty believed that the inspiration derived from large Catholic gatherings were no longer needed.

The aforementioned Jesuit and Benedictine mission schools were threatened with losing federal aid due to the fact that funding. Marty suggested that the sodalists petition the U.S. Congress for their federal trust money which was to be used for mission schools. If the schools were closed, children would be forced to attend off-reservation government boarding schools.

Federal aid ceased in June of 1900. The Indian Rights Association convinced the U.S. Congress to cut appropriations to contract schools that were mostly operated by Catholic religious orders. The Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions initiated a fund-raising effort and explored other means to replace the lost financial support. It was believed essential to keep the needs of the Catholic missions before the eastern Catholic public.

In 1904, President Roosevelt had directed the use of treaty trust funds for mission schools formerly receiving federal funding contracts. The new contracts, just implemented during the fall term, utilized money derived from the trust fund interest, not the principal. The Catholic missionaries were no longer needed.

A Minnesota Sioux-language newspaper charged the Catholic Church with theft of trust monies as the Roosevelt administration had unilaterally altered funding procedures so that contract awards were no longer tied to the trust fund and not from the pre-rated shares of mission school support. The Catholics retorted that the Protestants were spreading lies to which they were no longer willing to listen.

The issue was taken before the U.S. Supreme Court. The court rendered its decision favoring the Catholic Sioux position.

The 1907 general congress was very different from past annual gatherings. It was ripe with dissension and dissatisfaction. The bishop failed to attend due to illness. Congress participants overwhelmingly supported the mission schools, and narrowly resolved to retain the general congresses of the past. In an unprecedented move, a delegate group that disserted on the latter resolution departed and held its own congress two months later at Standing Rock Reservation.

Congress cohesiveness was clearly left wanting without Marty’s counsel. Successor bishops did not reign over all the former Dakota Territory from Marty’s see in Sioux Falls. Additional dioceses came to be created with sees in Jamestown, and Lead. Regional congresses began to appear intermittently. In 1892, congresses were held in both North and South Dakota during four summers. The gathering size remained large, with 300-400 participants each.

The principal concern of the 1903-1904 congresses was divorce. Several Sioux couples had recently divorced in spite of Church teaching to the contrary. Beginning in 1905, Church support for divorce was reduced.

The jubilation was short-lived. Church interest was declining among the younger generation.

Sodalities provided innovative Sioux lay leaders and missionaries with an opportunity to collaborate in building a meaningful new Native American Catholic society after the demise of the old.

Sodalities membership declined among the second generation Sioux Catholics. The lives of these young adults were more attuned to American language and life and less to Sioux tradition. Missionaries and catechists responded by redoubling their efforts among this generation.

Some successes were achieved. This is attested to by the continued existence of the Catholic Sioux Congresses today.

Deacon Ben Black Bear, Jr., director of Native Affairs for the Diocese of Rapid City, has been appointed to the state reconciliation commission.

More on this story in the February West River Catholic.